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## Eastern Washington Agricultural Partnership Wins National Customer Service Award

OLYMPIA – An innovative public-private partnership to provide technology training to Eastern Washington agricultural workers today was honored with a prestigious \$25,000 national award for customer service.

The Eastern Washington Agriculture and Food Processing Partnership won the U.S. Department of Labor's 2002 Pyramid Award honoring a collaborative workforce initiative that improved customer service.

Washington State Employment Security Commissioner Sylvia P. Mundy accepted the award on behalf of the partnership during a ceremony today at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies annual conference in Kansas City, MO. She was joined by Tom Martinez, human resource director for J.R. Simplot Company's potato division, and John Parks, of the Teamsters union in Yakima, who co-chair the labor management committee that oversees the partnership.

"The Eastern Washington Agriculture and Food Processing Partnership has become a national model of collaborative leadership, seamless integration of private, state, and federal resources, and effective labor-management teamwork," Mundy said. "Workers now have the skills they need to earn better wages and become more competitive in today's job market, and businesses are better positioned to be more productive."

The Eastern Washington Agriculture and Food Processing Partnership was created to meet employers' need to train workers in two of Washington's largest and most labor-intensive industries – food processing and farming. Together, they account for 14.1 percent of the state's total employment. In some counties, that figure rises to one out of every five jobs.

Federal, state, and private organizations have contributed nearly \$2 million and extensive expertise to the project. Participating employers responded by matching each public training dollar spent with \$1.47 of their own.

The customer-driven initiative has shown tremendous results since Jan. 2001:

- Training providers at colleges and technical institutes created 26 customized courses offering certification and opportunities for specific career advancement. They delivered training events for more than 32 companies.
- The program exceeded Governor Gary Locke's goal of training 400 employees by more than 75 percent, ultimately providing 785 training slots.
- Workers earned industry-recognized certification while developing expertise in such specialized areas as ammonia refrigeration, programmable logic control, equipment operation, electrical maintenance, Spanish and welding.

- In some cases, workers earned an additional \$300-\$600 over a four-month period following training.
- Training was completed at an average cost of \$450-500 per individual, per session. This represented remarkable savings to many employers who previously had to pay to send workers out of the area for training.

“The successful lessons learned from this award-winning new model have already spread to neighboring states and other industries within Washington,” Mundy said. “The program fundamentally changed how training institutions and government entities helped catalyze new training for existing workers. It took the old adage ‘listen to your customer’ and made it real in a way that has led to stronger businesses and increased income for a group of workers who traditionally have seen few career opportunities. As a result, the partnership has helped reshape the future of agricultural and food industries in Washington and beyond.”

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